

SEERKAZHI ARUNACHALA KAVIRAYAR AND RAMA NATAKAM

Prof. K.R. Rajagopalan

The advent of the musical trinity — Thyagaraja, Deekshitar and Syama Sastrigal — during the latter part of the eighteenth century was a landmark in the history of Karnataka Music of South India. Their influence on the art was so great that in later years almost all the older composers came to be forgotten. This was true in Tamil Nadu also. One of the earlier composers (actually an elder contemporary of Thyagaraja) in Tamil who deserves to be better known is Arunachala Kavi hailing from the place called Seerkazhi in Tanjavur District. Another composer of great merit is Oothukkadu Venkata-subbier about whom not much information is available. This paper deals with Arunachala Kavi and a later paper will present the latter composer.

Music had had a hoary past in Tamil Nadu. The Tamil language has been classified into three parts — literature, music and drama (*Iyal, Isai, Natakam*). Perhaps they were not considered as separate compartments — as drama is considered all over the world as a kind or type of literature. To trace the growth of Tamil music would require a separate article and this has been done in (Ref. 1).

Arunachala Kavi was born in the year Vijaya corresponding to 1711 A.D. He composed the opera *Rama Natakam* in his sixtieth year and died in the 67th year—having seen his compositions quite popular in the land. Thyagaraja was born in 1767, Syama Sastri in 1762 and Deekshitar in 1776. Thus Arunachala was already an old man when the trinity had their birth.

Arunachala lived a major part of his active life in the town Seerkazhi and that name is coupled with his. His father was a Jain who got converted to Saivism. Even in his early years, Arunachala had a flair for music and was very good at singing the Saivaite hymns. He had his education at the Dharma-puram Matt (one of the principal Saiva Siddhanta Maths of South India) and mastered the Tamil Classics, under the famous Ambalavana Kavirayar.

After marriage to a close relative, he set up a pawn-broker shop (called *Kaasukkadai* in Tamil). This not only provided him with a good living, but also with a fair amount of leisure to pursue his literary studies. Just as he was good at “estimating the fineness of the precious metal, he was equally proficient at estimating the worth of the literary works.” Two books were most liked by him — The *Tirukkural* of Tiruvalluvar and the *Raamakaathai* of Kamba. While the former was only a book of ethics, the latter gave the same in the form of a story which would be more appealing to the common man. Arunachala was fascinated by the *Ramayana* so much that he wanted to impart the story and the good lessons preached by it to a large number of persons who could not obviously read that epic in original. He gave a number of discourses on the epic. Two of his disciples, Venkataraman and Kodandaraman who were very proficient in music, requested him to compose songs from *Kamba Ramayanam*. Arunachala knew that before him many had sung about the great qualities of Rama but none had sung the story in simple, easy to follow words, which could be listened to by the large mass of people of Tamil Nadu. So he set about composing *keertanams* regarding the various incidents of the story. He first composed a few songs from the *Balakanda* and these were sung by his disciples. Encouraged by the good response received, Arunachala completed his full-length music-drama *Rama Natakam* in 1772 A.D.

About six centuries earlier, the famous Tamil poet Kamba had written his epic calling it *Raamakaathi* (Story of Rama). This was the first rendering of *Ramayana* into Tamil, even though very much earlier, the Alvars (singer saints of South India) had popularised the various incidents in that epic. The *Arangetram* or formal release of that work took place in the famous shrine of Lord Ranganatha in Srirangam — renowned as *Bhooloka Vaikuntha*. It is said that Sri Rama gave the image of Lord Ranganatha to Vibheeshana to be installed and worshipped in his Lanka. But when Vibheeshana halted for a while at Srirangam, the Lord refused to move from that place! Hence this shrine has some association with the actual story of *Ramayana*. Arunachala wanted his work also to be officially noted and released in the same premises. So he repaired to Srirangam and requested permission of the authorities. (It may also be mentioned that Vedanta Desika’s *Paadukaa Sahasram*—a string of 1000 verses on the *Thiru Paadukaa* of Sri Rama—was also composed in the same temple at Srirangam. This happened in 14th century A.D.).

The temple authorities agreed to this provided they got some ‘sign’ or ‘order’ from their Lord Ranganatha. Arunachala sat in a part of the temple and composed a very beautiful song “En Pallikondeeraiyaa” (O Lord! why did you stop and sleep here?) in *Kedaragowla*, set to *Aditala*. That night both the poet and the temple authorities had separate visions. The poet was asked to sing about the *Parivaara Devatas* and the priest was asked to accept *Arangetram* after such songs were sung by the poet. So, the next day, the

poet sang the 'Todayam' in which he offered salutations to *Garuda*, *Vishwakshena*, Five weapons of the Lord, *Alwaars* and *Aachaaryas*. The ceremony took place in the same Mandapa from which Kamba had sung his *Ramayana*. Arunachala was honoured suitably by the temple authorities.

The poet after having received the blessings of the Lord wanted to sing his *Ramayana* before Maharaja Tulajaji of the Tanjore court. But at that time, Tanjore was surrounded by the enemy troops of the Nawab of Arcot. He went to Anandarangam Pillai of Pondicherry. (Mr. Pillai, 1709-61) is famous for maintaining a dairy of events from 1736 to 1761. He was a close confidante of the French Governōr of Pondicherry. He was well known as a linguist and a philanthropist. His dairies were published in 12 volumes in 1894 in English).

Pillai referred the poet to Manali Muthu Krishna Mudali of Madras, a great patron of arts and letters. (It may be recalled that a later descendent of this family, Manali Chinnaswami Mudaliar was the first to set the notation for Karnataka music along with Subbarama Deekshitar; they together published the *Sangeetha Sampradya Pradarshini* in 1905. This book is a *magnum opus* for all modern researchers. Even today, there are a number of charitable institutions run by the Manali family.)

Arunachala went to Madras and sang his pieces before a large audience of patrons, scholars and the public. The poet was profusely honoured and has composed a number of songs in praise of his patrons. Later, after a treaty of peace between the Nawab and Raja Tulajaji, Arunachala could go to the Tanjore court and to the house of Ananda Rangam Pillai and receive presents and praise from them too. He found to his satisfaction that his works were quite popular even in his own times and the public also liked his simple diction which they could follow quite easily. Thus the long cherished wish of the poet that he should popularise *Ramayana* among the people of Tamil Nadu was fulfilled in a large measure and the poet had a peaceful end in 1776 four years after his composing the *Rama Natakam*.

To summarise, Kamba wrote in 12th century his long *Mahakavya* and Vedanta Desika followed it up by a string of 1000 words in the 14th century. In 18th century Arunachala Kavi sang *Ramayana* as a Drama in poetry. Thus there continued to be a tradition in Tamil Nadu of *Ramayana* being a source of inspiration and guidance to the people. Even today, there would be some discourse or the other on some aspect of *Ramayana* in one or the other part of the city of Madras.

Analysis of the work—Rama Natakam

There are the usual six cantos — Bala, Ayodhya, Aranya, Kishkindha, Sundara and Yuddha — prefaced by an introductory verse called *Paayiram*.

There are in all 278 poems in various types of metres:- Kochagam-6; Venba-2; Vachanam-1; Kalithurai-1; Viruthams-268.

Regarding the songs, there is a total of 258 made up of one *Thodayam*, sixty *Dipadais** and 197 *Dharus*** If we include the special song he composed on Lord Ranganatha, we get a total of 198 songs.

Ragas Handled

This composer has utilised only thirtysix *ragas* for the 198 *Dharus*. Saveri, Mohana, Madhyamavathi, Asaveri, Sowrashtra, Mukhari, Surali, Atana, Begada, Nadanamakinya are some of the *Rakti ragas* used. Thyagaraja (Ref. 6) has his seven hundred and odd compositions set in 212 *ragas*; while Deekshitar (Ref. 5) has used 182 *ragas* for his four hundred and sixty one songs. Thus the repertoire of Arunachala Kavi cannot be said to be very wide. But he wanted to use simple melodies and simple words to convey the story of *Ramayana* to the common man and hence the fewer *ragas* he employed. It is of course not certain that the original *ragas* given by the author have come down correctly in tradition. Full details of the *ragas* are given in Table I.

TABLE I
Ragas of the Dharus

Name	No. of songs
1. Saveri	20
2. Mohana	17
3. Asaveri	15
4. Madhyamavati	14
5. Kalyani	13
6. Sowrashtra	12
7. Todi	12
8. Anandabhairavi	8
9. Punnagavarali	8
10. Bhairavi	7
11. Sankarabharana	6
12-16. Mukhari, Surati, Atana, Begada, Kambhoj	5 each
17-21. Nadanamakriya, Useni, Dwijavanthi, Pantuvarali, Kedaragowla	4 each
22-23. Gowlipantu, Saranga	3 each
24-25. Yadukula Kambhoji, Ahiri	2 each
26-36. Nattai, Arabhi, Sri, Sahana, Bilahari Saindhavi, Khamas, Kapi, Natakuranji, Pharas, Yamuna Kalyani	1 each

* perhaps derived from *Dwipada* two line poem or a series of two line poems called *Kannigals* (Ref. 8).

** *Dharus* are mostly found in dance-dramas and operas. Deekshitar has also composed a *Dharu*. The words are simple, music is not very complicated and there are a number of common sayings and proverbs included in the songs. There would be a large number of words in each of the songs. (Ref. 8).

Talas Handled

Nine *talas* have been used, the most frequent being the *Aditala* of eight *matras*. He has used *Atatala Chapu* a number of times. This is not a well-known *Tala*. Table-II gives the relevant details.

TABLE II
Talas of the Dharus

Name	No. of songs
1. Adi	115
2. Atatalachapu	63
3. Chapu	6
4. Triputa	5
5. Roopaka Chapu	3
6-7. Jampa, Ata	2 each
8-9. Misra Chapu, Roopaka	1 each

Dipadais

These songs are used whenever a battle scene is to be described; or whenever the grief of a particular character is to be portrayed; or when a conversation between two characters or a soliloquy is to be detailed. The passages can be said to be prose-poetic in nature and each of these is set to a *raga* and a *tala*. Full details of classification of the *raga-s* and *tala-s* of these *dipadais* are given in Tables III and IV.

TABLE III
Ragas Dipadais

1. Shankarabharana	8
2. Ghanta	6
3. Neelambari	5
4. Kambhoji	4
5-11. Mohana, Punnagavarali, Todi, Bhairavi, Madhyamavati Ahiri, Ananda Bhairavi	3 each
12-13. Mukhari, Yadukulakambhoji	2 each
14-25. Gowlipantu, Kalyani, Asaveri, Arabhi, Bhoopala, Dhanyasi, Nadanamakriya, Mangala Kaisaki, Pantuvrali, Kedaragowla, Sahana, Surati	1 each
	60

TABLE IV
Talas of Dipadais

1. Adi	38
2. Atatala Chapa	20
3. Triputa	2
	60

Many conversations have been dealt with under this head. To mention a few:- Rama and Parasurama; Kooni (Manthara) and Kaikeyi; Kaikeyi and Dasaratha; Bharata and Dasaratha; Ravana and Sita; Rama and Sita.

In many situations in which the grief or lament of a person has to be delineated, *Dipadai-s* have been used. For example — Vibheeshna's lament over the death of Ravana; Bharata's grief over the non-return of Rama yet after the lapse of fourteen years; Dhānyamāli's (mother) lament over her son Atikāya's death; Rama's grief over the onset of the rainy season after the separation of Sita.

When descriptions of fights have to be given, again the same metre is resorted to. For example — the fight between the two armies of Vanaras and Danavas; Rakshasas fight during the night; defeat of the *Moolabala* of Ravana.

Subject Matter of the Songs

Arunachala wanted to popularise the epic among the common people of Tamil Nadu and hence he chose the medium of a song-drama (*Geya Nataka*) which could be enacted even in villages. As an epic, it delineates the story of an individual who lived an exemplary life as a dutiful son, as a fond husband, as a good friend, as a refuge to the downtrodden and the oppressed — in short, one who set an example to others to follow. Hence, Arunachala has used simple words which were in daily usage; has used many of the common sayings and proverbs, to drive home the points he wanted to emphasize. The *cognoscenti* would find a parallel for this type of writing in many songs of Tyagaraja who also made a special study of *Ramayana* and delineated many of its episodes through his immortal songs.

Arunachala was an ardent student of Kamba and so has followed that poet closely in his narration. Thus he has a song in which Sri Rama has a glimpse of Sita as he enters the city of Mithila along with his brother and the Sage Vishwamitra. Such an episode does not find a place in Valmiki's Epic. Sita is in her mansion loitering on an upper story with her maids and Rama exclaims — "who is this lady who is so beautiful with long nose and longer eyes that even women would long to look at her face again and again! I feel that we were related in a previous birth also!"

Since Rama is "*Pumsaam mohana roopaaya*" — beautifully attractive even to men; his would-be-consort must be equally likeable to women also!

To appreciate the beautiful "setting" of the songs and the literary worth, one should, of course, study the original only. One more instance would be cited.

Hanuman has searched for Sita all over Lanka and finally reached the *Asoka Vana* where he sees to his horror, Sita about to commit suicide. He announces himself as the messenger of Rama the son of Dasaratha and sings about the divine beauty of his lord and master. The *raga* in which this song is set is Kedaragowla, one of the *rakti ragas* of Karnataka music. The song begins — “*Anda ramasoundaryam.*” “Lady can any one describe fully or explain completely the grand beauty of Rama? Will Lotus be equal to the beauty of his feet? His sturdy thighs resemble the trunks of the *Ashta Diggajas*; the vastness of his chest can be matched only by the vastness of this earth; the effulgence of his face would be equal to a hundred crores of moons! Can I convey to you all the thoughts and words that he has asked me to convey to you? You know him and the Vedas know him and so you can understand my insufficiency in reporting!”

For the Pattabhisheka ceremony of Sri Rama, naturally all persons had assembled — all Kinnaras, Gandharvas, Kimpurushas, princes and rajas of all countries of India, all the sages, the entire population of Ayodhya, men and women and children in all their finery had come. Angada held the sword, Sugriva helped Rama to ascend, Hanuman was already (as ready as ever) to hold the Lotus feet of Sri Rama; Bharata held the Umbrella aloft, Lakshmana and Shatrughana stood on either side with their whisks, Vasishtha adorned Sri Rama with the Makuta handed over to him by Sadaiappan; (one of Arunachala’s patrons). One is certainly reminded of a similar Kirti (*Maamava pattaabhiraama*) by Muthuswamy Deekshitar.

The one point of difference between the Musical Trinity and Arunachala Kavi is that the former almost always shunned patronage of any sort—either from kings or from eminent persons. Arunachala’s purpose was somewhat different. He wanted to popularise the story among the public of Tamil Nadu and he also knew that without patronage from the elite, his wish was not likely to be fulfilled. It was more his love for the epic that made him seek patronage rather than for seeking money or riches for himself. We have already remarked that he was quite well-off through his own profession.

That Arunachala Kavi succeeded in a large measure in his endeavour is borne out by the fact that even with the advent of the trinity so soon after him, his songs still are sung in many of the concert platforms in Tamil Nadu, they also form part of the repertoire of many a famous danseuse of the present day.

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